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Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry

RE: LD 1969 - An Act to Expand the Use of Funds to Support Land Conservation

Senator Ingwersen, Representative Pluecker, and members of the Joint Standing Committee on Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry, my name is Kaitlyn Nuzzo and I am the Government Relations Director for The Nature Conservancy in Maine. **I appreciate this opportunity to testify in enthusiastic support of LD 1969 - An Act to Expand the Use of Funds to Support Land Conservation.** We appreciate Governor Mills' efforts to bring this idea forward and the support of Senator Pierce, Senator Black, and Representative Pluecker, along with the other cosponsors.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Guided by science, we create innovative, on-the-ground solutions to our world's toughest challenges so that nature and people can thrive together. We use a collaborative approach that engages local communities, governments, the private sector, and other partners. The Nature Conservancy has been leading conservation in Maine for more than 60 years and is the 12th largest landowner in the state, owning and managing roughly 300,000 acres. We also work across Maine to restore rivers and streams, partner with fishermen in the Gulf of Maine to rebuild groundfish populations, and develop innovative solutions to address our changing climate.

The Land for Maine's Future Program (LMF) has been an effective tool in protecting some of Maine's most spectacular places and supporting our natural resource economy for over 30 years. During this time, the program has protected a wide variety of Maine resources including conserving landscapes for recreation and trails, protecting access to working waterfronts for fishermen, providing public water access to lakes and rivers, and supporting working farmland projects.

LD 1969 is a legacy opportunity to identify and secure future dedicated revenues for the Land for Maine's Future Program. The bill creates a LMF Trust Fund that will hold future and current LMF funds and ensure these dollars are able to generate investment incomes to further benefit the goals of the program. Establishing a trust fund would allow for new sources of funding to support the program and shift away from the need for future bonds. These changes would enormously benefit Maine by ensuring dedicated funding would be available for these types of projects and eliminating the uncertainty of searching for funding every few years when bonds or allocations run out. It would allow landowners and project partners time to develop the best projects, support staff and program flexibility and creativity, and allow the state to access outside federal funds or identify revenue sources. Think about the growth and impact the Efficiency Maine Trust Fund has had since it was established in 2002 - this model works and would be a huge benefit to our state.

Each LMF project brings together a unique blend of the same formula – a state agency sponsor, a willing landowner ready to sell or indefinitely give up development rights, community stakeholders, and clear public benefits. As you might imagine, bringing these pieces together requires patience and persistence. The best thing we can do to support the success of these efforts is build predictability and stability into the process. Long term funding for the Land for Maine's Future program allows landowners the time they need to make decisions, allows state agency partners to plan further in advance and prioritize projects as they become ready, and allows community and conservation partners more time to pursue match funding.

At the federal level, Congress recently passed the Great American Outdoors Act. Signed by former President Trump, GAOA secured the Land and Water Conservation Fund with permanent, dedicated funding. LWCF funds are similar to LMF and often used as match or support funding. Congress recognized the need to provide landowners and state agencies the security of knowing that these funds will be available to support projects on an annual basis. Long term funding allows all the parties involved to take their time and achieve the best possible outcomes.

Now is the time to establish the Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund. According to survey of Maine voters TNC commissioned in January 2023 with FM3 Research (Democratic Polling Firm) and New Bridge Strategy (Republican Polling Firm), nearly 7 in 10 voters see "great need / some need" for additional funding to protect air, water, and land. The LMF program consistently enjoys broad public support and has been approved by Maine voters each of the six times it has been on the ballot. Aside from its popularity, this effort dovetails nicely with other legislative efforts before this committee. LD 1285, which this committee unanimously supported, would direct another \$20M into LMF this year out of the cascade, effectively turning the 4-year, \$40M appropriations made in 2021 to 6-years and \$60M. And LD 1881, which was heard in this committee a few weeks ago, would allow the Maine DEP to direct mitigation funds related to renewable energy development and transmission lines into a fund like LMF.

The Nature Conservancy strongly supports the concept of a Land for Maine's Future Trust Fund and long-term funding for the Land for Maine's Future program. We urge this committee to pass LD 1969. Please do not hesitate to be in touch if our organization can provide additional information or support.